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ABSTRACT

In today's world, broad societal trends tend to originate in the center and migrate to the periphery. Europe and North America are in the center, and Australia is on the periphery. Of specific interest to communication scholars is the growth or ebbing of communication theories or techniques. One trend, the use of computers in communication scholarship, has entered a new phase. More quickly than has been true of previous innovations, computer usage in organizational communication research has made its way from North America to Australia. National, geographic, cultural, and time barriers all have influence, and political and linguistic differences exist, but the university communication curriculum is becoming increasingly more uniform. U.S. speech communication theory has only recently begun to take hold in British-influenced Australia, where speech communication has not traditionally been an academic offering. To avoid making U.S. and European mistakes by adopting "bad" ideas from those cultures, Australia must have: (1) knowledge of the U.S. and European scenes; (2) knowledge of the Australian scene; (3) knowledge of the vectors of idea transmission; and (4) longitudinal studies of the movement of foreign cultural influences into Australia. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that Australia will quarantine itself from Northern Hemisphere trends, good or bad. (SG)

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Paper

Can Australia Avoid Repeating American and European Mistakes?

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CAN AUSTRALIA AVOID REPEATING AMERICAN AND EUROPEAN MISTAKES?

It is an assumption of this paper that, in today's world, in general, broad societal trends originate in the center and migrate to the periphery. Europe and North America are in the center, and Australia is on the periphery.

It is also taken-for-granted that there is a time delay. Not as much today as a decade or so ago, but depending on the trend or fashion, a delay long enough for the phenomenon to be noticed abroad before it appears in the Southern continent. The question to be addressed is then, "Can this delay be exploited?"

Phenomena of interest include those perceptible occurrences in society such as the breakdown of the nuclear family expressed by increasing divorce rates, the women's and gay liberation movements, the decline in union membership, and the growing proportion of aged people in advanced societies. These things affect all of us, and are of special importance to communication scholars who have to be extremely sensitive to the cultures of differing audiences.

Popular culture also moves from the center to the periphery with a time lag. To illustrate this phenomenon, one might postulate a relatively straightforward longitudinal study to see how Batman and Mutant Teenage Ninja Turtles travelled across the Pacific. Big movies are now often released in America and Australia simultaneously, but toys, such as He man, and the Ninja Turtles have at least a season's delay.

The style, organization and the actual basketball facilities, players, and the paraphenalia of the game would be another example of cultural migration. After release in the States, how long does it take for a Michael Jordan

poster to be sold in a shopping mall in a provincial Australian town?

Of more specific interest to communication scholars, is the growth or the ebbing of communication theories or fashionable techniques. Although Messrs. Berger and Chaffee have published their Handbook of Communication Science, (a work I throughly recommend and use in class), even within that tome, the authors have to explain why they have adopted the word "Science."/1/ Suffice to say, I would suspect that the physical "hard" scientists are unlikely to be too enthusiastic of our appropriation of the term. In communication studies, we have to be too sensitive to the cultural ephemera of "art," to really qualify as a pure "science."

Anyone who has studied our discipline will have to accept the fact that we are subject to fads and fashions. The empirical effects research of the fifties and sixties became unfashionable in the seventies and eighties. Described as of "arcane methods of counting" in James Carey's memorable phrase, "effects studies" were definitely not fashionable within the "qualitative" research circles in the United States nor within the cultural studies groups in England.

Of course, for communication consultants, such techniques never lost their appeal as they seemed to be favored by businesspeople. I would suspect that positivist approaches and even effects research has reached a nadir of popularity, and is set for a renaissance.

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AS A VECTOR OF CULTURAL CHANGE.

The reasons I would point to for this, without being a technological determinist, would include remarkable accessibility of software packages such as SPSS for mainframes and for microcomputers, and of high quality databases such as census material often available on CD ROM.

Communication people with a literary background, who for a variety of reasons, had formerly failed to appreciate the value of statistics, have suddenly seen the light. (Let's face it, I am using a euphemism. Speaking plainly, these people either failed or avoided mathematics or statistics in high-school or college). Now, however, they are being trained in-house, on their employer's time, to use statistical packages along with other software such as spreadsheets, filers, and word processors which include desk top publishing facilities.

With the statistical packages, no longer does one have to learn formulae. The machine will do the donkey work for you and print out graphics, piecharts and histograms, in color. These can be scanned and inserted into desktop published material.

I am not saying that this phenomenon is either good or bad. It simply is. While outraging the purists, it is clearly the wave of the future. At the turn of this century, a "chaffeur" had to maintain and fix the unreliable motor cars of the day. Within the decade, drivers didn't have to know a piston from a cylinder in order to drive a car.

I'm finding, from experience with our students, that the classic "garbage in-garbage out" adage for non-statistically trained students doesn't apply for the brightest of them. They don't correlate their telephone numbers and their shoe sizes. They go from a logical formulation of the problem, which may have a literary bias admittedly, to a clear graphic representation and verbal description of the solution. They seem not to need to concern themselves with the machinery of statistics. For them, the process is transparent.

Again, I'm not claiming high standards of validity or reliability for their work. Conventionally, their work will

be on a par with the routine polls and surveys reported in USA Today or The Bulletin in Australia, or with broadcast ratings which are often reported to three significant figures, or at least to one decimal point.

We have entered a new phase in the use of computers in communication research. This phase is as far removed from demonstrating the binomial theorem from first principles, or doing an analysis of variance with an electric calculator, or putting IBM cards into a card reader, which are the tools my generation learned, as the Wright bothers' Flyer is from a Boeing 747.

From what I have seen and heard from our exchange students, the techniques of organizational communication research have travelled from North America to Australia much faster than the large societal changes which we described before. We have the hardware and the software in Australia, but some of the situations and the problems the software was designed to solve, don't apply, at least not yet, in Australia. For example, the categories for ethnicity, for employment quotas and multicultural studies don't necessarily fit or apply. The equal opportunity laws regarding race, color and creed in employment are different in Australia from what pertains in the United States. Religious schools receiving government funding can discriminate regarding creed for employment, for example, in Australia.

Today, it is standard practice for us to conduct classes with organizational communication students where, without any prior experience, they interrogate high quality social science databases. For example, without going into the intricacies or the theory of Chi-Square, we can have them cross-tabluate responses to a question concerning attitude to the current Australian flag (a current topic right now), with attitudes to American influence to Australia, to the Monarchy, or to the adoption of a republic. They also have access to similarly constituted data on preference towards

political parties, individual politicians, tariff protection, abortion, homosexuality, immigration rates and other salient topics.

Australian communication scholars are not disadvantaged in any way by the technology here as, according to newspaper reports, Australia and Canada are leading the world in providing census data to their citizenry.

ELECTRONIC MAIL.

It has yet to be demonstrated that such devices as electronic mail will lessen the time delay for fashions and techniques to travel from the United States to Australia.

In the United States, when one travels about, it is a common enough sight to see, in the faculty member's office a microcomputer hooked up semipermanently with that of a colleague who is collaborating on a joint manuscript. Undoubtedly, Australians will be included within this network more in the future. At the moment, however, electronic mail is mostly used as a message-sending device rather than for creative collaboration in our field.

Along the corridor of my office building, one colleague could be talking to Singapore, another to Sydney, and another to Michigan State. The different times can be an advantage. For example, when I sent the proposal for this theme panel to David Swanson in Urbana on a Sunday night, I returned to my office at nine o'clock on Monday morning to see a reply on my screen. Admittedly, that other workaholic on the other side of the world had to turn on his computer that Sunday afternoon, but, without being disloyal to my institution, we don't get that kind of turnaround on my home campus. This type of thinking in Australia, a country which has been shaped in its modern form, according to the distinguished historian Geoffrey Blainey, by the "tyranny of

distance," is not only remarkable, it is positively encouraging.

The cost of the email to the individual researcher on Australian campuses is zero. Telephone and fax, are, by contrast, rather expensive. For example, if you send a fourteen page fax to London, you can wind up with a forty dollar bill, depending on the speed the fax machine transmits, the time of day of the call and the density of the copy being transmitted.

NATIONAL, GEOGRAPHIC, CULTURAL AND TIME BARRIERS.

These innovations makes one wonder about national, cultural geographic and time barriers. During the sixties, as a instructor, I can remember a pertinent remark from a colleague from Syracuse University who had done his bachelor's at Hofstra. In other words, his academic training had all been done on the east coast. He subsequently accepted a beginning teaching position in the midwest, specifically, in Detroit. He said, the content is the same in the communication course, but the authorities are different. A cultural anthropologist might have seen this as an observation that the resident deities had different names in the different places, but the same functions.

Today, if you fly from New York to Los Angeles, I think you will see more uniformity in the university communication curriculum than pertained a quarter of a century ago. At the University of Hawaii campus, the Journalism, Speech, or other communication departments seem to offer curricula similar to that on the mainland. As the plane travels to Australia, and you can't go any further on the globe without approaching home, the same familiarity applies, at some institutions today.

The differences within the United States are wide. From Maine to Hawaii, geographically and culturally, is a considerable difference. It would be interesting to see if travellers from Germany or Japan see a wider difference in life between Maine and Hawaii, than between San Francisco and Sydney. The differences between some parts of America and some parts of Australia, in physical appearance, climate, culture, wealth and lifestyle are perhaps less than some parts of America with other parts of that nation. Similarly, the difference between Sydney and Bourke, an outback town, are far greater than between Sydney and San Francisco.

POLITICAL AND LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES.

While the Reagan-Thatcher conservative regimes held sway in the Northern Hemisphere during the 1980s, Australia had a Labor government. While very conservative for an avowedly socialist party, it was, nevertheless, to the left of the alternative opposition party, the Liberal-National coalition.

It is important to point out here that specialists in communication pathology would note the linguistic "false-friend" in the term "liberal." Australians use "liberal" to mean "conservative," just as the British call a private school a "public" school.

One can find such terms listed in their sometimes amusing profusion in several readily available documents. One exemplary effort is designed for exchange students from the University of Illinois, and has eased much intercultural shock. These terms are not just labels. They betray a mind set. "Liberal" etymologically means "free." Being free from convention means "socialistic" in America, "conservative" in Australia.

Quite apart from the confusing different use of English terms, there are certain cultural "false friends" pertinent to communication scholars which arise out of the Australian tradition. First of all, there is no Speech Communication tradition in Australian education. To many Americans, this is like a year without Thanksgiving. While Christmas and Easter are pretty much the same in the two countries, except the seasons are all wrong, in Australia, there is no Thanksgiving at all!

It is very different in cross-cultural interaction to detect an absence. If you don't know it isn't there, you don't look for it!

Daniel Boorstin, in the third book of his trilogy The Americans: The Democratic Experience explains that American university students from the nineteenth century on, effortlessly outperformed their European counterparts in public speaking./2/ The theory and practice of the expressive arts were available in democratic public education, whereas in Europe, they were, and to some extent still are, looked on as the preserve of the elite. England today, is still a class-ridden society where people are culturally conditioned to "know their place." Australians are much more obstreperous than the ever-ready-to-queue English, but the cultural support of speaking in public is not as available to Australians as it is to Americans.

Again, for linguistic experts, I note that many Americans don't even recognize the word "queue." The Random House dictionary has the meaning of "lining up" as a secondary meaning after "a braid of hair." Individualist Americans don't line up for public transport with the resigned patience of the British. The Australian Macquarie gives the "line up" meaning first place, betraying again, British influence.

When one looks at the broad spectrum of expressive arts training in Australia, one can see how compensation is made for the lack of Speech Communication within the educational system. Lawyers in training have moot courts. There is debating in high schools, and to a relatively slight extent in universities. Clergy are taught to speak publicly in seminaries. Amateur theatrics are popular. Service clubs such as Jaycees and self-improvement clubs like Toastmasters are available for wannabes in business, but these are American imports.

In the early seventies the government funded a relatively lavishly-equipped national film school with a mandate to produce top flight professionals, without funding or even encouraging media or expressive arts education in grade school, high school or at the tertiary level. Today, however, most state-run educational establishments support the expressive arts in a rudimentary fashion, and media studies are beginning to find official support in the high-school curriculum.

AUSTRALIAN PRECONCEPTIONS AND PREJUDICES.

The limits of Australian understanding of the world of communication scholarship has been highlighted by a book review in the Journal of Communication. Reviewing David Sless's In Search of Semiotics, Ted Smith wrote:

> ...few readers conversant with U.S. theories of interpersonal communication will find Sless's basic ideas either new or radical. In particular his semiotic triad is essentially identical to Ogden and Richards's triangle of meaning, his projected authors and readers are variants of R. D. Laing's metaperspective, and his discussion of semiosis as the basis of conceptualization is strikingly similar to Susanne Langer's analysis of meaning and rationality./3/

The point the reviewer is making is that no American scholar could have written the book, as the solution to the problem

Sless posed and then solved was glaringly obvious to American-trained eyes.

He then comments on the ignorance of American communication scholarship by European scholars: "What is novel (about the book) is not these ideas but their application in the context of European structuralist semiotics."

The simple answer to the question, "Why is this so?" is that, in Australia, many communication scholars came from the British tradition. Many are English immigrants, and only in the past decade has the direct American influence began to take hold.

If the Birmingham School is mostly a memory in the U K , a visitor to Australia can still find "left academics living in Australia, but talking about Birmingham."/4/

The British intellectual sway over the former colonies still pertains. The BBC radio news can be heard on the national broadcaster, and Australian bookstores, by law, with some exception, still have to buy their American books via London. This means, in effect, American books come to Australia at least six months after publication at a premium which may be twice the original price in American dollars. Of course, you can write, phone, or fax you Mastercard number to L A with your order, but changing currency in small amounts is expensive, and most Australians patronize their local booksellers as they have done for generations.

British publishers have excellent lobbyists with Australian law makers in Canberra.

In summary, if we were to try to answer the question, "Can Australia avoid repeating American and European mistakes?" we would have to meet these preconditions.

First. Knowledge of the American and European scenes. We would have to know, "What is changing? What is a mistake?"

These are large questions requiring deep understanding and an ability to make subtle value judgments.

Imagine trying to define, let alone select, positive and negative aspects from the political correctness and post-feminist debates in America. One can have a personal opinion, and can take personal action accordingly. It would take a hardy soul indeed to have the temerity, in this day and age, to make selections for some institution.

Second. Knowledge of the Australian Scene. Sless' In Search of Semiotics is very useful for someone from the British communication studies tradition in Australia. The American reviewer, as we have seen, says, "So what's new?"

The American tendency in judging Australian culture is to expect Australians to be "just like us" and find difficulty with cultural difference./5/ One can't expect prior knowledge of absences of things taken-for-granted in a home culture. There is no Thanksgiving, so Speech Education, no tradition of buying American books unless they come via London. The political language, interaction, structure, and climate are very different.

Similarly, American communication ideas probably have come through the perceptual filter of your friendly neighborhood English immigrant. This communication scholar probably flew to Australia when Margaret Thatcher closed down Birmingham. Going the long way round, many ideas seem to have suffered in transit. From what I see, the ideas of Kenneth Burke have hardly survived the trip. Even in educational circles, John Dewey doesn't have nearly the stature he has in the States.

It is hard to understand a culture when the taken-for-granted foundations of thought are not there.

Third. With regard to the flow of information, we would have to identify the vectors. Clearly, mass media and popular culture (movies and McDonalds) would be prime suspects.

Paradoxically, for most academics, active change agents are less noticeable. The Committee for Economic Development, Business Roundtable, Business Council and Foundation for Economic Education with free-market ideologies are active. Churches, corporate interests for sports such as basketball, trade associations for plastics and telecommunications, all have agendas.

Fourth. Finally, longitudinal studies such as the hypothetical one described previously of following the Ninja Turtles march, or paddle, or swim across the Pacific, would need to be done.

This is a daunting task. The Batman dolls, conceived in Los Angeles, manufactured in Taiwan, shipped to Australia are now mostly in the garbage dump because they are too old to survive. While most desirable in 1989, by 1992 they are not rare enough to be collectors' items, nor interesting enough for their intended consumers.

QUARANTINE.

Understanding the donor and the recipient cultures, identifying the vectors, and plotting their progress are facets of technique. There is a larger ethical question, which perhaps concerns Australians more than anyone else.

In its short history of European settlement, Australia has imported devastating pests. The classic example occurred about 200 years ago when an English family imported a couple of rabbits as pets. The ecological devastation would have been less had they exploded a couple of atom bombs.

In this century, our scientific industrial elite imported Bufo marinus, a cane toad. It was introduced to kill off a beetle they had previously imported to eradicate yet another pestilential insect. The beetle had got out of hand, but it was a benign curiosity compared with the cane toad. The loathsome toad, which poisons anything that eats it, is currently spreading across the continent ruining the delicate ecological balance and destroying native fauna.

Isolation, in the past, has provided a natural quarantine for Australian livestock and agricultural industries. Today, with no country more than a day away, the quarantine system is strained.

As I prepared this talk, a story from the national newspaper The Australian, which was lying on my desk, caught my eye./6/ A woman had imported the lavae of a screw-worm fly within a wound on her body. She had been in Brazil a few days previously. Quarantine officials were checking on her progress, because the infestation of such a pest would be as catastrophic to the ten billion dollar livestock industry in Australia, as a fruit fly infestation would be in California.

The analogy of a fly lava in a human vector is perhaps not appropriate for the transmission of ideas. Ideas cannot be readily recognized under the microscope. We have to be on the lookout for their effects.

Australians seem destined to follow American trends and fads, sometimes even after the fad has long fizzled in its country of origin. The time delay exists. We should use it to choose the good and eliminate the bad. The problem is distinguishing which is which.

I cannot see any political will for any group to make the value judgments necessary to identify and quarantine any deleterious innovations. If this isn't done, however,

Australia will continue to follow Northern Hemisphere trends, good and bad. Perhaps, some mechanism for effecting such a system may be forthcoming. For example, our Northern Hemisphere colleagues might keep us in mind and publish immediately pieces on problems (or potential problems) in Australian journals. Australian scholars then may be forewarned.

All ideas are gratefully accepted.

NOTES.

1. Charles R. Berger and Steven H. Chaffee (eds.), Handbook of Communication Science (Newbury Park: Sage, 1987, p. 10).

2. Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans: The Democratic Experience (New York: Random House. 1973, p. 464).

3. Ted J. Smith III, "Review of In Search of Semiotics," Journal of Communication 38 no. 1 (Winter, 1988) pp. 134-137.

4. Graeme Turner, "Dilemmas of a Cultural Critic: Australian Cultural Studies Today," Australian Journal of Communication 16, 1985, p. 5; 12.

5. George Renwick, Australians and North Americans (Chicago: International Press, 1980).

6. Julian Cribb, "Woman's Head Bore Killer Maggots," The Australian (May 8, 1992 p. 5).